A Pioneer Presbyterian Preacher In Texas The Rev. Hugh Wilson, D. D.

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It was on a Sunday morning in the autumn of 1867, that I attended my first Presbyterian Church service. As a very small boy, I had ridden on horseback behind my paternal grandfather, some seven or eight miles across the country to visit that church and its service. Something like ten years prior to that time he had come from western Kentucky to South Texas, with a view of making the latter his future home. He remained there, however, but a year or so, becoming dissatisfied with the new country, returned to his former home in "the States." So, after those years of absence, he came back to Texas on a short visit, and, desiring to renew his old time acquaintance with friends he had formerly made, over in the old Presbyterian neighborhood, he took me up behind him and we made the above mentioned visit to the String Prairie Presbyterian Church, then in the northwestern end of Burleson county. This church

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In October, 1838, Dr. Wilson, with his family, moved on West to Washington county, Texas, and near the town of Independence in February, 1839, founded and organized another Church, it being the second Presbyterian Church established in Texas. Soon thereafter he organized still another church, only a few miles from Independence. This latter organization was known as the "Chriesman's Settlement Prospect Church," and the community afterwards became what is now designated as Gay Hill. Here he lived and labored until early in 1850. At this last mentioned church, by direction of the General Assembly and the Synod of Mississippi, was organized, on April 3, 1840, the first Presbytery in Texas, which was called the Presbytery of Brazos, being so named from the river whose rich valley was in sight and but a few miles East of them. Those present and participating in that organization were Rev. Hugh Wilson, Rev. W. Y. Allen and Rev. John McCullough, as the ministers, with one ruling elder, Mr. John McFarland, from the Independence Church, who had moved along with Dr. Wilson to that place from San Augustine county. The Rev. Dr. Daniel Baker also attended this meeting as a corresponding member.

This new Presbytery, after its organization, instead of joining the Synod of Mississippi, became independent. This resulted in that Synod's cutting off the salary it had theretofore been paying to Dr. Wilson as its missionary in this territory, over which it then, by the consent of the General Assembly, asserted authority. Of this action of the Synod and of its results to the good Doctor, the

Rev. Dr. J. W. Miller, a long-time close friend and fellow-laborer, afterwards said: "He never complained, but it was hard. Six months passed before he knew that his salary was stopped. He had sold his road-wagon for corn to feed his family, put the corn in a crib with his Jersey wagon on the side for shelter, and hired an Irishman to husk the corn. The day was cold and a fire was kindled and left burning during the dinner hour. The crib, corn, and wagon, were burned. He must turn to teaching and farming, or his family will starve. But preach he did, far and near. No Presbyterian minister deserves to be more gratefully remembered" * * * "He always had a beef or a mutton and it was surprising how many his log house could entertain. Laymen and their families came twenty and thirty miles to those meetings and stayed for days. A blanket for a bed, and a live oak tree for a shelter. Plain food was abundant. Such meetings, too large for any house, with such preachers as Wilson and Baker, were often held under the trees and were greatly blessed."

But the good Doctor, though having a large family relying on him for support, did not become discouraged, but made the very best of the situation and for the next ten years continued to reside in the Chriesman settlement, preaching there and in the adjoining communities. This then being one of the most refined and cultivated and best educated sections of Texas.

During the year 1850, Dr. Wilson, together with several members of his churches in Washington county, moved to the northwest part of Burleson county, now Lee county, about six miles

north of the village of Lexington, forming themselves into what was thereafter for many years known as the "Presbyterian Neighborhood." There on May 22nd, 1852, they organized themselves into the above named "String Prairie Presbyterian Church." Here, during the early days of March, 1856, Mrs. Wilson died after an illness of only a few hours, and as he himself said, thereby suddenly terminated an intimacy of more than fifty years standing. In 1858 he was married to his second wife, Mrs. Elizabeth Reid, the widow of a deceased missionary to the Indian Territory, she being a sister of the Revs. R. M. and A. J. Loughridge, themselves pioneer Presbyterian ministers and missionaries in Texas and the Indian Territory. The latter of whom, after Dr. Wilson's death, became the pastor of the String Prairie Church. The second Mrs. Wilson survived her good husband for many years, residing with her many relatives in Lee and Travis counties, dying within the last few years.

Dr. Wilson was one of the incorporators and a member of the first board of trustees of Austin College, which was incorporated by an Act of the Legislature of Texas, dated Nov. 22, 1849. This college conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity in 1857. At the meeting of the Synod of Texas, at Palestine, on Nov. 5, 1857, he was elected its moderator, being the fifth moderator of that body.

He continued to live among and minister to the membership of the String Prairie Church until the time of his death, which occurred, after a

short illness, on March 8, 1868, only a few months after my first visit to that church, as above narrated. As a memorial to the founder and much loved first pastor of that good church, during the year succeeding his death, its name was changed to the "Hugh Wilson" Church, by which name it has since been and now is, known and designated in the record of our Church. Here, where he wrought his last labors and where then lived his children and grandchildren, he was laid to rest to await that final trumpet call of his Lord and Master, whom he had served so faithfully and so long.

One of his great-grandchildren, Mrs. Henry J. Bissell, with her family, are now members of that good old church, Mr. Bissell being a ruling elder therein and also the clerk of its session. Several of his great-grandsons have been ministers in the Presbyterian Church. The late Rev. Irvin L. Cunningham, who died on Oct. 9, 1909, while a member of the Presbytery of Dallas, being one. The Rev. Louis O. Cunningham, now a member of the Presbytery of El Paso, being another. Mention should also be made to R. L. Owen and C. P. Owen, who sustain the same relation to him.

The records of the Presbytery of Central Texas and of the Synod to which Dr. Wilson belonged for so many years of his life, attest the fact that he was ever a good and faithful Presbyter, seldom missing a session thereof, though the means of travel in those days was laborious and slow.

Dr. Levi Tenney, who well knew Dr. Wilson during the last several years of his life, and who for some years served as the minister of the old Hugh Wilson Church, before he himself went to

glory, said of the great and good founder of that church and of his death: "Not alone the connection of Mr. Wilson with the early history of our church in the State, but his personal character and the affection he inspired in every one who knew him, made this separation more than ordinarily a sad one to those who remain behind. He was a singularly modest and retiring man, preferring the seclusion of a country charge, yet he was a forcible and instructive preacher, and faithful, working and successful pastor. His end was peace."

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